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Why was Caesar Really Killed?

Fact & Fiction

by Michael Parenti

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Michael Parenti's latest books include The Assassination of Julius Caesar: A People's History of Ancient Rome (New Press 2003); The Terrorism Trap (City Lights 2002); and To Kill a Nation: The Attack on Yugoslavia (Verso 2000). For further information, see his website http://michaelparenti.org/.

> On the 15th of March, 44 BC, in a meeting hall adjacent to Pompey's theater, the Roman Senate awaited the arrival of the Republic's supreme commander, Julius Caesar. This particular session did not promise to be an eventful one for most of the senators. But others among them were fully alive to what was in

the offing. They stood about trying to maintain a calm and casual pose---with daggers concealed beneath their togas.

Finally Caesar entered the chamber. He had an imposing presence, augmented by an air of command that came with being at the height of his power. Moving quickly to the front of the hall, he sat himself in the place of honor. First to approach him was a senator who pretended to enter a personal plea on behalf of a relative. Close behind came a group of others who crowded around the ceremonial chair. At a given signal, they began to slash at their prey with their knives, delivering fatal wounds. By this act, the assailants believed they had saved the Roman Republic. In fact, they had set the stage for its complete undoing.

The question remains, why did a coterie of Roman senators assassinate their fellow aristocrat and celebrated ruler, Julius Caesar? An inquiry into this incident reveals something important about the nature of political rule, class power, and a people's struggle for democracy and social justice---issues that are still very much with us. The assassination also marked a turning point in the history of Rome. It set in motion a civil war, and put an end to whatever democracy there had been, ushering in an absolutist rule that would prevail over Western Europe for centuries to come.

The prevailing opinion among historians, ancient and modern alike, is that the senatorial assassins were intent upon restoring republican liberties by doing away with a despotic usurper. This is the justification proffered by the assassins themselves. In my recent book, *The Assassination of Julius Caesar: A People's History of Ancient Rome*, I present an alternative explanation: the Senate aristocrats killed Caesar because they perceived him to be a popular leader who threatened their privileged interests. By this view, the deed was more an act of treason than tyrannicide, one incident in a line of political murders dating back across the better part of a century, a dramatic manifestation of a long-standing struggle between opulent conservatives and popularly supported reformers.

Just about every leader of the Middle and Late Republics who took up the popular cause met a violent end, beginning with Tiberius Gracchus in 133 B.C. and continuing on to Gaius Gracchus, Fulvius Flaccus, Livius Drusus, Sulpicius Rufus, Cornelius Cinna, Marius Gratidianus, Appuleius Saturninus, Cnaeus Sicinius, Quintus Sertorius, Servilius Glaucia, Sergius Catiline, Clodius Pulcher, and ending with Julius Caesar in 44 B.C. Caesar's death also marked the end of the 500-year Roman Republic. Even more reprehensible, the aristocratic oligarchs and their hired goons killed thousands of the Roman commoners who supported these various reform leaders.

The history of the Late Republic has been distorted by those writers who regularly downplay the importance of material interests, those whose ideological taboos about class realities dim their perception of the past. This distortion is also manifested in the way many historians, both ancient and modern, have portrayed the common people of Rome as being little better than a noisome rabble and riotous mob. In word and action, wealthy Romans made no secret of their fear and hatred of the common people and of anyone else who infringed upon their class prerogatives. History is full of examples of politico-economic elites who equate any challenge to their privileged social order as a challenge to all social order, an invitation to chaos and perdition.

The oligarchs of Rome were no exception. Steeped in utter opulence and luxury, they remained forever inhospitable to Rome's democratic element. They valued the Republic only as long as it served their way of life. They dismissed as "demagogues" and usurpers the dedicated leaders who took up the popular cause. The historians of that day, often wealthy slaveholders themselves, usually agreed with this assessment. What is rather startling is the fact that the great majority of classical historians of the modern era adopt a viewpoint not too different from the one held by the Roman aristocracy. Whatever their differences in nationality, religion, language, and epoch, most of these historians share the same class-bound ideology, causing them to see the struggles of

ancient Rome from the perspective of the elites rather than from that of the struggling proletarii and plebs.

Caesar's sin was not that he was subverting the Roman constitution---which was an unwritten one---but that he was loosening the oligarchy's overbearing grip on it. Worse still, he used state power to effect some limited benefits for small farmers, debtors, and urban proletariat, at the expense of the wealthy few. No matter how limited these reforms proved to be, the oligarchs never forgave him. And so Caesar met the same fate as numerous other reformers before him---and so many other reformers down through the centuries since his day.

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Zefram Mann • 4 years ago

It utterly baffles me why anyone would take the word of a bunch of conspirators and assassins at face value.

5 • Share ›

Chris Machabee ➚ Zefram Mann • 3 years ago

Well, I think it is along the same concept as the death statement, a statement made when a person knows they are die, and will die in a moment. These killers, having been caught, known to have killed Caesar, to that, there was no question, as to why they would speak the truth, because what else would they say? They weren't there? They didn't do it? Look, when there is no escape you give up, you know you're going to die, why lie. They say, yeah, we did it he was messing with our money so we snuffed him.

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Nuthan Shetty • 7 years ago

This was the exact point I was questioning. No matter which book I read, it is tilted favorably to the self styled Liberatores. From everything that I have understood, Brutus, Cassius, Cimber, Casca etc were fearful of Caesar on a personal level, because of his larger than life personality and his military triumphs, as well as afraid of how he would loosen their grip on the purse strings of Rome, with his populist actions. No wonder the people of Rome loved Caesar, as evidenced by the fury they displayed in running Brutus and his cohort out of Rome in terror after it was disclosed that they were the assassins. Cicero was a prime mover in the covert activity against Caesar but he was too cowardly to be part of any actual murder plot.

Hence Caesar was dispensed in the same way as every Senator or Tribune of the Plebs who ever tried to make a difference was before him, for instance the brothers Gracchi, Drusus, Catiline and others. The Republic, which these men claimed to protect, was merely the lifestyle and opulence they were used to - the ownership of a large number of slaves, untold wealth, large landownings and armies of private clients who kept them rich. The ironic thing is that these men were not all Patricians. Brutus himself came from a Plebeian limb of the Junii. What they all had in common was their uncommon wealth and centuries of power. Even more ironic, Caesar was a Patrician.

3 ^ | v • Share ›

obidiah_slope • 6 years ago

I read [somewhere] he was offed because he was about to change the money system. Now who

MORE COMMENTS:

chany - 11/16/2003

Please could you tell me who killed Julius Caesar?Please could you reply as soon as you get this e-mail THANKYOU

---

ozzy - 10/16/2003

im learning about caesar in high school i want to know
what other things y the senates killed caesar please reply

Jonathan Dresner - 8/26/2003

Mr. Moner,

Obviously, an op-ed length piece cannot contain the kind of documentary support that this argument needs. That's why Parenti wrote a book (see his self-description). But even without offering "new" evidence, this argument fits what I know about Rome much better than the older theories, and it puts Caesar's death in a pattern which is entirely consistent, rather than treating it as sui generis.

And there is some extraordinary work being done on lifestyles and "the masses" in the academy right now. For an example, I'd refer you to the collections "The Other Side of Western Civilization" which includes a great collection of excerpts from articles and books all on the social history of non-elites.

Gus Moner - 8/25/2003

I believe too little history is written from the perspective of the masses, especially ancient history, for the obvious lack of education of the masses and the oligarchies disregard for the rabble. That being said, little is known before the 19th century of the real lives of the common people.

Yet from what I read of your argument, even if in principle I can agree with it, I regretted that I could not obtain any factual data from it that would back up the assumption, as plausible as it may be.

Don Williams - 8/24/2003

Greek/Roman influence on development of the US Constitution is well established. James Madison researched history and developed his "Notes on Ancient and Modern Confederacies" to argue at the Constitutional Convention that confederacies (as set up by the Articles of Confederation) were prone to collapse--as illustrated by several such confederacies in Greek history. His observations were published as Federalist No. 18.

The Greek historian Polybius explained circa 120 BC the source of Rome's strength. He noted that governments tended to be one of three types: rule by the one (king), rule by the few (aristocracy), and rule by the many (democracy). He noted that each form tended to fall into despotism and to be replaced by another form. He noted, therefore, that the most stable form of government was one like the Roman Republic's mixed government --which had features of all three: an executive of two consuls (one), a Senate (few) , and elections with widespread suffage (the many.) The similar pattern of the US government should be obvious, although Madison invented new concepts (e.g, federation with powers shared among a central government and states)

The influence of Greek/Roman historians on the Enlightment is also well documented. See Montesquieu's " Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline" at http://www.geocities.com/c_ansata/Montesquieu/Mont00.html .
Chapter II, Book 1 of Machiavelli's Discourses ("Of the different
Kinds of Republics") is almost a word for word copy of Chapter 6 ("On the Forms of States") from Polybius' "The Rise of The Roman Empire"). The book I cited earlier, Carl Richards' "The Founders and the Classics" has much more evidence /examples/citations documenting the Greek/Roman influence on the Constitution.

F.H. Thomas - 8/22/2003

If you ask a high school or college kid the questions

1. where did you come from?
2. how did you get here?
3. how about those around you?

Most would not have the slightest clue. They are cast adrift by a crass culture to make the same mistakes their ancestors did, and be manipulated by thuggish elites, often disastrously. I hope that everyone involved here can do his part to amend this.

David Thomas - 8/22/2003

A nice analysis by Don until he overreached and politicized his comment by claiming a connection between and unwritten Roman oligarchic constitution and a written United States constitution based on Enlightenment philosophy. Where is the connection to checks and balances in a republic characterized by universal male and female adult suffrage?

The disturbing trends in our current representative republic can not be blamed on oligarchic control. Don suffers from the same class blindness as though of Caesar’s assassination only in reverse. We can't blame America's problems on an oligarchy where millions of voters that constitute forty percent of the electorate refuse to participate and get exactly what they deserve, government that does not represent them.

Don Williams - 8/22/2003

eom

Corevan - 8/21/2003

You lost me Dan,

Just to clear up my Semantics.

All Mainstream Media is Mass Media, but not all Mass Media is Mainstream Media.

Corevan - 8/21/2003

I'm not blaming any victim, in the free market there are no victims, if you chose to consume a bad product, Caveat Emptor.

This leftists belief that people are not smart enough to know what is good for them is bull.

The only victim will be our Republic if it fails because it's citizens chose to give up their power to others.

Arch Stanton - 8/21/2003

Another amusing thread. Rich Romans killed Gaius Julius Caesar to prevent democratic reform. Globalization destroyed the Roman middle class and ended the Roman republic. Then Rome became one of the top 3 empires. Then globalization destroyed the Roman empire with Chinese trade deficits and diseases. Then there were no more republics for 1800 years as it became closer to being now. But now it may become just like then again. No one can tell because the study of Greek/Roman history has been suppressed and the profit-driven mass media is keeping it all a secret.

George Oilwell - 8/20/2003

"If the consumer demands cheep quick and easy information do not blame the profit driven Mass Media who supply it."

If the consumer "demands"? You're blaming the victims, whether you realize it or not.

John Gorentz - 8/20/2003

"The prevailing opinion ... is that the senatorial assassins were intent upon restoring republican liberties by doing away with a despotic usurper. ... In my recent book, The Assassination of Julius Caesar: A People's History of Ancient Rome, I present an alternative explanation: the Senate aristocrats killed Caesar because they perceived him to be a popular leader who threatened their privileged interests."

I don't get it. How is this an alternative explanation? To me the two seem like one and the same explanation.

The conflict between a king, an aristocracy, and others is one we've seen in many other societies, as well. (Not that it always played out the same way. THOSE differences are the fascinating part.)

Corevan - 8/20/2003

Don, Really insightful. And again we agree on something, that the Mainstream Media is worthless and banal. There are however many alternative sources we can access, thanks to modern technology, that our Roman predecessors did not have.

If the consumer demands cheep quick and easy information do not blame the profit driven Mass Media

who supply it. If the American experiment fails it is not the fault to the media companies, but the fault of the people who's ignorance of our system let it slip away.

Dan - 8/20/2003

Mainstream media IS mass media - the media where the masses get their information, spoon fed and predigested, despite the FAUX NEWS misdeclarations.

Those of us who THINK peruse the mass media cursorily, but then read the rest of the story in the alternative media, including alternative versions of the press, broadcast, and internet, giving each source its due, but comparing and relating to the real world we experience daily. The mass media crowd only get what the owners thereof wish them to get.

I, myself, actually find Letters to the Editor, or the broadcast and internet equivalents, the most valuable section of the mass media...

Dan

Don Williams - 8/20/2003

1) While helping my 14 year old son plan his high school course selection, I examined the curriculum at both my local suburban high school and at Phillips Exeter academy, which my son will attend. In both cases, I found pressures for students to not study Greek-Roman history. Basically, there is no Advanced Placement (college credit) course offered for Greek/Roman history, the Greek/Roman history course is taught at ninth grade level vice senior level, and selection of the Greek/Roman history in the ninth grade tends to not leave time for the AP course in European history (1400 AD to present).

K12 education is driven by US universities == and the above situation shows enormous stupidity on the part of the US educational establishment. Many US citizens never study history or political science once in college. K12 education is where most
US citizens are exposed to political theory.

Political theory since Aristotle has been based on historical experience. When the US Founding Fathers developed the US Constitution --which defines how our country is governed -- they did not look to European history after the fall of Rome , much of which was 1800 years of monarchy. The Founding Fathers were trying to create the first Republic in 1800 years --and so they looked to the history of Greek democracies and the Roman Republic for guidance. See Carl Richards' "The Founders and the Classics" for details.

IF US citizens are to appreciate the future perils facing our country, their best guide is the fate of ancient Rome and Greek. Greek Roman history was the keystone of early American education -- an important factor in gaining popular support for the American Revolution. It's frightening that our education system is now depicting human history as life under Oriental or European despotisms.

Re the fall of the Roman Empire in the West (vice Republic) , historians have given roughly 20 causes, many of which reinforced each other. I would rate the influx of a disease into Rome from the Orient along the trade routes --the devastating pandemics of circa 150 AD which greatly weakened the Empire -- as a

greater cause than the outflow of silver-- and one of the early forces for Rome's decline.

The Roman birth rate declined with prosperity --leaving her less able to deal with pressure at the borders from the exploding German population. Climate changes in Eurasia drove the Huns into migration and their invasions pushed the Germanic tribes into the Roman areas.

Prosperity depended on commerce and trade which in turn required law/order and suppression of bandits/invaders/pirates. Yet the Roman military became a type of parasite, draining enormous wealthy from the productive segments of society via heavy Imperial taxes.

Frequent civil wars --led by generals fighting to become Emperor -- were greatly destructive. (Of 29 emperors who ruled between 180AD to 284 AD, only 4 died a natural death.) The despotisms established by strong emperors, like Diocletian, with heavy state control of business, were destructive to the economy and reduced the wealth available for tax.

Don Williams - 8/20/2003

1) The US mainstream news media does not inform the US voters --it projects a mythology which manipulates public opinion for the benefit of the media's owners and corporate advertisers/supporters. One example of this is the failure of the media to note the adverse effects of Bush's tax cuts on the middle class-- whose 401K/IRAs will be taxed heavily 10 years hence to repay the $Trillions that Bush is taking from government Trust Funds. A second example is the media's failure to identify the US business interests who provoked the Sept 11 attack and the business/political interests who are manipulating the "war on terror" for their benefit -- at the expense of the mass of US citizens and the national interest.

2) Rome did have a constitution --based on a balance of powers , as described by Polybius circa 120 BC. (See Book VI of Polybius'
"The Rise of the Roman Empire"). Polybius indicated that Roman had conquered the Mediterrean Basin, where Greece had failed, because of the merits of Rome's "mixed government". The US Founding Fathers were heavily influenced by the Roman historians and Polybius when developing the US Constitution -- after all, few republics --vice monarchies --had existed in the 1800 years since the fall of the Roman Republic.

3) Re the news media, the Roman historian Cassius Dio had an interesting discussion of how the news media changed as the Republic was replaced by a plutocracy and finally by a military dictatorship. In Book 53, section 19 of his "Roman History", Cassius notes:

"However, the events which followed that period [fall of Republic and ascendence of Augustus Caesar to supreme power] cannot be told in the same way as those of earlier times. In the past all matters were brought before the Senate and the people, even if they took place at a distance from Rome: in consequence, everybody learned of them and many people recorded them, and so the true version of events , even if considerably influenced by fear, or favour, or friendship, or enmity in the accounts given by certain authors, was still to a significant extent available in the writings of the others who reported the same happenings, and in the public records.
But in later times most events began to be kept secret and were denied to common knowledge, and even though it may happen that some matters are made public, the reports are discredited because they cannot be investigated, and the suspicion grows that everything is said and done according to the wishes of the men in power at the time and their associates. In consequence much that never materializes becomes

common talk, while much that has undoubtedly come to pass remains unknown, and in pretty well every instance the report which is spread abroad does not correspond to what actually happened."

It seems to me that Cassius has given a pretty good description of the US TV networks.

Corevan - 8/20/2003

Hey George,

While the "mainstream" media is full of "propaganda, disinformation, and the banal blathering of corrupt blowhards" Mass Media includes all forms sorts of information.

While many Americans want to be spoon-fed everything from their political views to their retirement security, many of my friends, myself included, choose to think for ourselves, and take responsibility for our own lives.

And thank God for the free market of ideas. As there is a demand for insight and opinion different than what the mainstream media offers, so there is a supply for it. Witness the rise in popularity of certain radio programs.

I prefer to think that the glass is half full, not half empty. While thing seem bleak now, the American spirit is still alive, and our ability to change and adjust with the times will overcome the current malaise we are in.

It is incumbent upon us the plebes of this country to remain informed of the actions of our government to avoid the Empire of our Italian ancestors. “We have a Republic if we can Keep it” B. Franklin

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David Salmanson - 8/19/2003

The fall of the empire (I don't know about the Republic) was largely due to the trade deficit with China which drained the Roman treasury. Rome was still but one empire among others, the Persians and Chinese being the two major ones of concern, so I would be hesitant to claim that they were hegemonic. It's also unclear how well Rome ever controlled the provinces outside of garrison cities. The point about Egyptian wheat is interesting, but I was under the impression that the Med. trade was well established prior to the fall of Carthage. Didn't Egypt act as the breadbasket of the Macedonian empire (short lived though it was) as well as supply most of Greece? I'm asking not doing that annoying making a statement while seeming to ask a question strategy. I do know that in my school, our World to 1500 class spends relatively little time on Rome and more on China and Persia with some on India (probably more than most other upper schools with similar courses). In fact, we bundle Persia, Greece, and Rome together and treat them as one continuum constantly coming back to a few key themes that reappear, forms of governence, the tension between state and province, the role of the individual in religion (basically following the Persian Mystery religions and Zoroastrianism through Hellenized Judiasm into Christianity and eventually Islam but that's later.) We also give the Byzantines a lot of attention, so the fact that we pay comparatively more attention to the later Roman empire as opposed to the Republic and early empire is somewhat unusual too.

George Oilwell - 8/19/2003

"Mass Media allow instant and in-depth visual and verbal access to what is really happening in our Government and worldwide. This allows every American the ability to educate themselves on the facts, if they so desire."

You would have been accurate had you used a two letter word as the first word in the paragraph above. That word? "If."

Citizens today who rely on the Mass Media, only get propaganda, disinformation, and the banal blatherings of corrupt blowhards, all selected and presented by sychophantic media whores who don't even have the modesty to describe themselves as stenographers to power.

Corevan - 8/19/2003

Well thought out Don,

While I think that there are many parallels to the decline of the Roman Republic and the failing of the American Experiment I also think we have two advantages the plebs and common folks of Rome did not have, our Constitution and mass media.

Our Constitution, while currently under attack from all sides, does provide for Governmental Checks and balances that, when in place and enforced, would prevent Empire.

Mass Media allow instant and in-depth visual and verbal access to what is really happening in our Government and worldwide. This allows every American the ability to educate themselves on the facts, if they so desire.

The key to any Representative form of Government is the active participation of its Citizens. Had Roman Plebs known the extent to which the Oligarchy held them down they may have been able to prevent the death of so many reformers and saved their republic. If we are to avoid the same fate of Rome we must use the media to educate ourselves, and the Constitution to take back our Government.

“It is the doom of Man that they forget” Merlin the Magician.

Don Williams - 8/19/2003

The Roman plebs had always struggled with the Roman aristocracy --and had often prevailed in the period up to the fall of Carthage.
Partly because Roman conquests during the Republic depended upon universal military service by citizen soldiers --forcing the oligarchy to grant concessions to the common citizen.

What changed things was the destruction of Carthage. This left Rome as the sole superpower in the Mediterrean basin--and the Roman elite quickly used her enormous military power --developed during the long period of competition with Carthage -- to conquer the basin.

This empire was a disaster for the Roman middle class , however. The small Italian farmer --the backbone of the Republic --was often driven into bankruptcy by the massive flood of cheap imports (e.g., Egyptian wheat) and cheap labor (foreign slaves bought by the wealthy to work on the large estates.) Plus it's

questionable whether the Roman military empire really earned a profit given the heavy costs of supporting the military. However, the profits of empire went to a wealthy few while the burden was dumped on the middle class via taxes and military service. The rich became enormously rich while the ranks of the poor swelled.

The military "reforms" of Marius circa 107 BC replaced the citizen army with a volunteer army of long service professionals, recruited from the poor and loyal only to their commanders.

This professional military freed the patricians from any need to bargain with the vast bulk of plebians. As Sallust noted, corruption became rampant and the law a joke in the later stages of the Republic (70 AD - 30 AD). The misery and deprivation suffered by poor ensured that they viewed any proclamations about the Republic's "liberty and justice" with contempt.

The US constitution was based on the mixed constitution of Rome, with various modifications. The Roman Republic is one of the few examples of a republic based on broad sufferage in human history.
The parallels between the fate of the Roman Republic and developments in the US today -- the similar patterns of social forces -- are disturbing.

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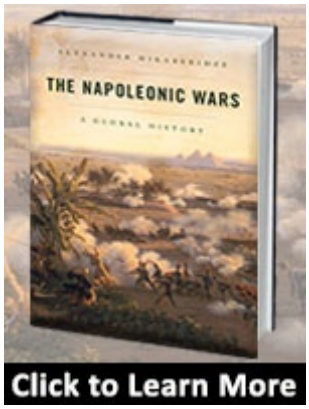

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